



Robert Fisk

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As the centenary of the First World War Armenian Genocide nears, a survivor describes how she still hears the screams

The Turkish police were using whips on the children and big sticks to beat them



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Yevnigie Salibian, aged 100, escaped deportation, but she suffered a near-death fall when her family fled to Syria
Missak Kelechian

She was a child of the Great War, born on a faraway killing field of which we know little, one of the very last witnesses to the last century's first genocide, sitting in her wheelchair, smiling at us, talking of Jesus and the Armenian children whipped by the Turkish police whom she saw through the cracks in her wooden front door. It's not every day you get to meet so finite an observer of human history, and soon, alas, we will not see her like again in our lifetime.

They took me to meet Yevnigie Salibian last week up in the Mission Hills of California, whose warm breezes and palm trees are not unlike the town of Aintab in which she was born more than a hundred years ago. She is an old lady now in a home for the elderly but with a still impeccable memory and an equally sharp and brutal scar on her thigh – which she displays without embarrassment – where a horse's reins suspended her above a ravine until she almost bled to death in her final flight from her Armenian homeland. "Hushhhhhh," she says. "That's how the blood sounded when it poured out of me. "I still remember it: 'hushhhhhh', 'hushhhhhh'."

The facts of the Armenian Holocaust are as clear and real as those of the later Jewish Holocaust. But they must be repeated because the state of Turkey remains a holocaust denier, still insisting that the Ottoman government did not indulge in the genocide which destroyed a million and a half of its Armenian Christian population almost a century ago. The Armenians were axed and knifed and shot in their tens of thousands, the women and children sent on death marches

into the deserts of northern Syria where they were starved and raped and slaughtered. The Turks used trains and a primitive gas chamber, a lesson the Germans learned well. Very soon, there will be no more Yevnigues to tell their story.

She was born on 14 January 1914, the daughter of Aposh Aposhian, an Aintab copper merchant who taught his five children the story of Jesus from a large Bible which he held on his lap as he sat with them on a carpet on the floor of their home. They were – like so many Armenians – a middle-class family, and Aposh had Turkish friends and, although Yevnigues does not say so, it appears he traded with the Ottoman army; which probably saved their lives. When the first deportations began, the Salibians were left in their home, but the genocide lasted till the very last months of the Great War – it had begun within weeks of the Allied landings at Gallipoli – and in 1917, the Turks were still emptying Aintab of its Armenians. That's when the sound of crying led three-year-old Yevnigues to the front door of her home.

“It was an old wooden door and there were cracks in it and I looked through the cracks,” she says. “There were many children outside without shoes and the Turkish gendarmes were using whips to drive them down the street. A few had parents. We were forbidden to take food to them. The police were using whips on the children and big sticks to beat them with. The sounds of the children screaming on the deportation – still I hear them as I look through the cracked door.”

So many parents were killed in the first year of the Armenian genocide that the orphans – tens of thousands of feral children who swarmed through the land in their absence – were only later driven out by the Turks: these were tiny deportees whom Yevnigues saw. The Aposhians, however, were able to cling on until the French army arrived in eastern Turkey after the Ottoman surrender. But when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk launched a guerrilla war against the French occupiers of his land, the French retreated – and in 1921 the surviving Armenians fled with them to Syria, among them Yevnigues and her family, packed into two horse-drawn carts. She was among the very last Christians to leave her Armenian homeland.

“My family was divided between the two carts. I changed places with an old lady. It was at night and over a ravine, our horses panicked, and the cart overturned and an iron bar killed the old lady and I was thrown over the edge of a bridge and only the horse's reins saved me when they got wrapped around my leg. Jesus saved me. I hung there and there was the ‘hushhhhhh’ sound of my blood pouring out of me.” Yevnigues shows the harsh scar on her leg. It has bitten deeply into the muscle. She was unconscious for two days, slowly recovering in Aleppo, and then Damascus and finally in the sanctuary of Beirut.

The remainder of her life – as she tells it – was given to God, her husband and the tragedy of losing one of her sons in a Lebanese road accident in 1953. A photograph taken on her arrival in Beirut shows Yevnigues to have been an extraordinarily pretty young woman and she had, she says, many suitors. She eventually chose a bald-headed Evangelical preacher, an older man called Vahran Salibian who had a big smile and whose name – Salibi – means crusader. “He had no hair on his head but he had Jesus in his heart,” Yevnigues announces to me. Vahran died in 1995 after 60 years of marriage and Yevnigues has lost count of her great grandchildren – there are at least 22 so far – but she is happy in her cheerful Armenian nursing home.

“It's not a good thing to be away from your family – but I like this place. Here, it is my extended family.” She loves America, Yevnigues says. Her family fled there when the civil war began in Lebanon in 1976. “It is a free place. All people come from everywhere to America. But why is our President a Muslim?”

I try to convince her this is untrue. She reads the New Testament every day and she talks constantly of her love for Jesus – this is an old lady who will be happy to die, I think – and when I ask her how she feels today about the Turks who tried to destroy the Armenians, she replies immediately. “I pray for Turkey. I pray for the Turkish officials that they may see Jesus. All that is left of the Prophet Mohamed is dust. But Jesus is alive in heaven.”

And I am taken aback by this, until I suddenly realise that I am not hearing the voice of a hundred-year-old lady. I am listening to a three-year old Armenian girl whose father is reading the Bible on the floor of a house in Aintab and who is looking through the cracks of her wooden front door and witnessing her people's persecution.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/as-the-centenary-of-the-first-world-war-armenian-genocide-nears-a-survivor-describes-how-she-still-hears-the-screams-9224585.html>